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Matthew Rendle (ed.) *The Centenary of the Russian Revolution: New Directions in Research*

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“Putin has often given the impression that he would prefer to forget about 1917 altogether,” so comment Matthew Rendle and Anna Lively in their joint contribution to this special issue of *Historical Research*. (239) Thank goodness the current generation of young researchers into the Russian Revolution do not think the same way as Putin! Based on the evidence of this volume, the broad conclusion of any review of the current state of research into the Russian Revolution has to be that it is in safe hands. As guest editor, Matthew Rendle sets out “to sample current research by early and mid career scholars regardless of topic”, and the result is a fascinating collection of articles. There is no common theme, but four common approaches can be discerned: there are local studies which advance our understanding of existing debates; there are explorations of continuity and change; there are new areas of research; and there are challenges to existing preconceptions. What all the contributions have in common is that they mine the great volume of primary material made available over the last twenty-five years, thus broadening our understanding of Russia during the revolutionary years.

Reading Alistair Dickens’ account of the overthrow of the Tsar in Krasnoyarsk, I kept being reminded of Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s 1972 article for *Canadian Slavonic Papers* “The Problem of Power in the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia” where he first introduced the concept of the “sub-elite”, which in his view played a key role in mediating between the party leaders and the masses. Dickens extends our knowledge of the sub-elite phenomenon to a new local arena. The informal network built up around the Krasnoyarsk *Samostoyatel’nost’* workers’ co-operative, which he focuses on, played precisely that role. As he notes, founded in 1913, co-operative activists “fulfilled a crucial mediatory role between railway workers and socialists”. (22) Incidentally, the very same could have been written about Donetsk and Khrushchev’s role in the local consumer co-operative. Although the labour movement was only

strong enough in Petersburg and Moscow to establish legal trade unions, legal opportunities existed throughout the empire.

Another local study which provides a fresh angle on a well-established debate is Yuexin Rachel Lin's account of White activity on the Amur river during the Civil War. The White's obsession with "Russia one and indivisible" meant that they could not tolerate the way Chinese traders, supported by China, tried to end the Russian monopoly on the Amur river trade once the Tsarist empire crumbled. By spring 1918 Chinese traders had started to buy up redundant Russian boats and ply their trade throughout the summer sailing season. Kolchak responded in spring 1919 by trying to enforce the return of ships to their former Russian owners, and then relenting. In July Chinese gunboats arrived at Vladivostok, and by the end of September they had entered the Amur, only to be fired on and forced to retreat. Outraged Chinese opinion resulted in a trade ban from which the Whites came of worse, deprived of essential food supplies as their military position worsened. In March 1920, once the new Far Eastern Republic had been established and the Whites put to flight, the Chinese gunboats were allowed to continue their journey up the Amur. The Amur river conflict really was "a microcosm of the challenges presented by the Russian periphery". (99)

On the opposite periphery of the Empire, Kitty Lam gives chapter and verse on how it was that Lenin and other revolutionaries could find sanctuary in Finland; Lenin "visited Finland twenty six times from 1901-17", she informs us. (61) Her lively tale, interspersed with reports of SR and Bolshevik bomb factories, and underground printing presses, makes clear that the Finns were determined to resist pressure from the Imperial Russian state, but, egged on by the right-wing press, Stolypin was equally determined to assert Russia's rights when it came to security matters. In autumn 1907 the Council of Ministers convened a special committee on Finnish affairs, the Ministry of the Interior proposed a series of changes, the Finns resisted, but ultimately the changes introduced in 1910 meant that the Finnish Senate no longer had any say over those issues deemed to be "All Russian". Despite these new provisions, the wealthy of Petersburg continued to favour dachas on the Finnish coast, and those dachas continued to give cover to revolutionary activity.

Maria Galmarini-Kabala's contribution is not a local study, but its narrow focus on the deaf in the Russian Revolution highlights from a new perspective the issue of social provision during the New Economic Policy. Of course, we learn much about the discrimination against deaf people under the old regime, and their great hopes for the new. Inevitably the readers' thoughts are drawn to discrimination against women, and the great hopes vested in Bolshevik rhetoric on that topic. Yet, just as the reality of divorce legislation and alimony provision was by 1926 an unhappy compromise, a product of the restraint on public spending, so by 1926 the All-Russian Society for Deaf-Mutes was concerned that the promises made in the 1918 Constitution were not matched by the complex provision of both work and social assistance payments. Employers often preferred to sack deaf workers than provide employment, yet those able to work did not qualify for assistance. In 1926 activists were demanding "that deaf people's entitlements to both work and assistance were to be protected as legally defined rights". (227)

Continuity and change is a hardy perennial when it comes to the study of 1917, and several of these articles fall into that category. Pavel Vasilyev suggests that the ideas of the German Free Law movement were taken up by members of the Moscow Law Society in 1914 and eventually found their way into the concept of "revolutionary conscience", so important for early Soviet writers on legal matters. Simon Pawley considers how "nervous weakness" was considered in both the years before the revolution and the 1920s. A popular magazine could warn before 1917 that "most city dwellers eat too much meat and hence suffer from gastric catarrh, neurasthenia, heart palpitations, rheumatic and arthritic illnesses" (201), while a booklet published in 1928 urged people to eat regularly and avoid gambling and alcohol because "such a life will erode nervous health more rapidly than the most exhausting work". (207) While it is true that there is continuity in the message that, despite the social cause of some nervous complaints, individuals should take responsibility for their own health, how this should be done is treated very differently before and after 1917. Some things did change. The Bolsheviks would never use the sort of suggestive advertisement issued by the Russian-American Apothecary Company in 1912 suggesting men concerned about their sexual potency should send away for a brochure which would be returned in "a plain envelope". (203)

Three of the articles explore what are essentially new areas for study and in so doing contribute to the growing debate about how the Soviet state set about winning over those who did not share its goals. Aaron Retish's pioneering study shows how, as soon as the Tsar had been overthrown, reformers began to think how prisons could change from being places of punishment, as they had been under the old regime, and become places of rehabilitation; inmates would live disciplined lives, but would be transformed before they were released. These ambitions were clearly formulated in summer 1918, but proved almost impossible to deliver. In the best cases there were prison newspapers and amateur dramatics, and prisoners were able to work, but Retish describes some desperately poorly equipped prisons where rehabilitation played no role. Interference from the *Cheka* and regular influxes of political prisoners complicated the story. Yet, rehabilitation was not abandoned – in 1922 the People's Commissariat for Justice established 32 agricultural colonies and 28 farms across Soviet Russia. (143)

Matthew Rendle takes a similar time scale, 1917-1922, and looks at the role played by the travelling sessions of the revolutionary tribunals in "bringing state power to a wide variety of Russia's spaces". (112) Initially established in a rather *ad hoc* way, the network of revolutionary tribunals was systematised by summer 1918 and from then on organised travelling sessions to more remote areas of Russia to deliver justice. Show was always of the essence. Sometimes size mattered: the Moscow revolutionary tribunal visited Volokolamsk in August 1920 and, in the course of nine days, held 25 trials involving 110 people. (107) Always the public were involved: sessions took place in town squares, on river steamers and the people went to see it. During the civil war the cases dealt with banditry and desertion; then it was abuse of office and the failure to pay the food tax. And the show trial element could work – the trial by the Orel Provincial Revolutionary Tribunal of deserters in the small town of Livny prompted some three thousand deserters in the district to hand themselves in.

James Ryan adopts a broader time scale, 1918-1930, but also considers how, in 1918 the People's Commissariat for Justice tried to look to the "treatment" rather than the punishment of crimes, but moved in 1923 to greater concern for the protection of society, especially when it came to class enemies. This dilemma, he suggests, then

characterised the rest of the 1920s, especially when it came to the kulaks. When in the mid 1920s peasants pushed for a non-party peasant union, was it political naivety or the Machivellian intrigue of the kulak? In this way, what began as a “progressive” criminal code, seeking to re-educate rather than punish had become, for peasants at least, a justification for extra judicial police methods to remove those considered socially dangerous elements.

Finally, two articles challenge our preconceptions of political events and in so doing transform our understanding of the revolutionary process. Christopher Gilley responds to the current claims by Ukrainian historians that Ataman Grigoriev and his ilk were motivated by nationalism by asking what it was that led them to take the field against the Bolsheviks. By way of conclusion. he does not fundamentally disagree with Serhy Yekelchuk that “the rebels were not conscious Ukrainian nationalists [but] were motivated by local concerns, prejudices and naïve anarchism”. However, he does see something else as well, a window dressing of nationalism. He notes that these self-declared left-wing opponents of “Russo-Jewish, pseudo-socialist Bolshevism” did take seriously the legends of the Zaporozhian Cossacks and consciously drew on them. Part of their mobilising power came from dressing up in Cossack garb, and the “pervasiveness of Cossack symbols” was testimony “to the success of nineteenth century historians” in propagating the myth of the freedom loving Zaporozhian – they were naïve anarchists, but in Ukrainian dress. (189)

Last, but by no means least, Lara Douds asks to take seriously the coalition government which administered the Soviet Russian Republic from December 1917 to March 1918. The Left SRs were not “Bolshevik puppets”, as Leonard Schapiro once told this reviewer, but partners in government, the coalition government “was not in a constant state of disabling conflict and disarray” (35). For the Left SRs this coalition administration was “the dictatorship of democracy” and they played a full part in the 53 Sovnarkom meetings that were held, as well as serving in the two executive bodies the Malyyi Sovnarkom and the Narrow Executive, comprising Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and the Left SRs P. P. Proshyan and V. A. Karelin. Douds shows that, as well as limiting the power of the Cheka, which Isaak Steinberg refers to in his well-known memoirs, the Left SRs modified Bolshevik policies in Ukraine and took an active part

in various commissions, including that on food supply, and on the constitution; the July 1918 constitution guaranteed that Sovnarkom was responsible to the Central Executive Committee elected by the Congress of Soviets and reported to the Central Executive Committee on a weekly basis, consistent with Left SR demands. When Proshyan reported to the Second Congress of the Left SRs in April 1918, his verdict on the experience of government was surprisingly upbeat, despite the fact that the party had just decided to leave the coalition because of the Bolsheviks' commitment to the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. This description of the Left SRs in government makes the notion that in July 1918 they could have formed an administration of their own, possibly with the support of dissident Bolsheviks, far more convincing.